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Volume 25
Number 2 *Arts Issue*

Article 26

December 1996

Wester Home Place

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The Wester Home Place

by James Calvin Schaap

The old house marked for demolition was the Wester place, the childhood home of Holly Wester Eidemiller, and I suppose that was reason enough for her uncharacteristic anger. The place was altogether unpretentious, as square and fortress-like as any old frame house, four good walls with ordinary windows, no gingerbread, no bric-a-brac, and only a square block of dull gray cement for a front porch, a chunk of concrete pitched noticeably west-to-east as if years ago the mason had simply dropped it out front, pre-poured, before moving on to another job.

The old front yard of Holly Eidemiller's home place has been all Barneveld State Bank for years. The Board of Directors bought it in 1968, a piece of ground that was home to a healthy stand of cottonwoods that people say bathed Main Street in fleecy down every June and shade all summer long.

This year the bank wanted the house. Because Holly is the kind of woman most preachers would nominate for sainthood, what made her public outrage at the bank's offer almost mystifying was the fact that long ago her mother had already consented to sell the charming chunk of the lot, its sprawling front yard and towering cottonwoods. At that time already, the sale of the house must have seemed predestined, to Holly at least, who always seemed to have her wits about her.

The bank was not one bit pushy about cutting a deal. For all those years, the Board hadn't even approached Holly about buying the place; only when Holly's mother was taken to the Pioneer Home was Holly even gingerly approached with an offer that seemed neither untimely or unreasonable; the word on the street was the price was very gracious.

"Why do they have to have everything?" Holly shouted at me one sunny morning after worship. "Why on earth do they have to buy up every last thing in town?" She rolled her eyes angrily. "Don't you think someone ought to stop them? I mean, look what happened a few years ago when everything was failing."

She was referring to the farm crisis, when every banker in the county, men who only a few years earlier pushed growth like seed salesman, were hunted down by bankrupt farmers with zero credit and overdue promissory notes tucked away in the cubby-holes of their workbench.

"It makes me sick to see the bank growing like that when everybody else has to cut back," she told me, waving her hand in front of his face to try to enlist the fulsome power of the church. "It makes me plain sick."

She hadn't even heard the sermon.

Holly Wester Eidemiller is fifty years old, although she looks 35. She's lean as a quick lunch, so trim I don't doubt that if those cottonwoods were still standing she could shimmy up the trunks as quickly as she might have when she was ten. She's gray around the temples and her dry skin is creased and cragged as a farmer's because she's lived so much of her life outdoors, even though she's stayed at home as a mom for most of her years. As a kid, Holly Wester spent most of her summers perched up in the cottonwoods on her long front yard. People walking back home from the post office would sometimes see her up so high they'd think of calling the fire department, but then they'd hear her whistling something from The Mickey Mouse Club or whatever and second-guess their own fears. Master Tom-boy she was, people say.

"They think they can buy me out just like everybody, but I'm not going to budge. No way," she said. "I'm going to sit still right there until I die"—fist up, hot as a kiln, mad as you wouldn't believe, lecturing on that church lawn to whoever's hearing aid battery still had juice after my own long sermon. Standing there with cups of coffee in their hands, having what the church calls "fellowship," lots of people witnessed the whole thing. But that was her plan.

"It's just wrong," she told him. "It's evil, and they won't quit. There's not a thing I can do about it because they've got the city on their side now too."

"How?" I said.

"They'll condemn the place. The city wants them to have a parking lot too. They want the

house gone."

I appreciated her misery because I've always appreciated her.

"It's the principle," she said. "I've got no choice. You tell me if that's fair?"

"No," I told her. "It's your house. It's your property."

"I won't let them do it," she said. "I'm not going to stand for it. I'm going to fight it, and I don't care what it costs. It's just another one of them things where the rich get richer," and then she pointed her finger. "You understand," she said, meaning me, the spiritual leader, a man of God, the arbiter of good and evil.

The incensed Holly Wester Eidemiller I met outside church that Sunday was not the woman I'd come to respect. She'd distinguished herself the very first moment I saw her, on the night the church scheduled a welcome for us. That date was also the night Holly and her husband, Ben, had scheduled an activity for the church's high schoolers; they've been youth leaders for years.

The church slapped together a program—ladies trio, a song by the Sunday School kids, a couple of jokes about the city boy coming to the country—then punch and coffee and pie a la mode. It was late June, the time of year when days stretch so long you wonder if darkness is on unrestricted leave, but that night was a wonder, full of welcome and love.

When it was over, I walked outside to an emptied parking lot; and there, just beyond the stretch of concrete, was a football game—or what I thought was football. Either football or hockey—something violent at least, I thought.

Actually, it was a game called "Capture the Flag." It was a welcome, right? So some kid came hauling by and stuck that rag in my pocket, a gesture as well-meant as any of a hundred hand shakes. The kid jerked me by the shoulder and began to run interference for me, while directing me toward some unseen goal. I knew that if I played the warthog it would take years to gain back confidence he'd lose right then and there, so I took off like a man reckless with the assurance of his own destiny.

At first, the kids were reluctant to hit me. But once I stiff-armed one of them, a whole posse got together and beat down the interference. I was swarmed, brought to my knees, smothered. Four or five kids peeled themselves off hurriedly until only one was left and that was Holly Eidemiller.

"That was wonderful," she said, winking.

That's how I was introduced to Holly Eidemiller.

A week after that church service where she'd made a scene, I was in my study in the basement of the church when I heard steel on steel from the floor above. I looked up at the church calendar and was reminded of the "Hot Potato Supper" the kids were putting on that night, but it was 3:15 and school was still on. It had to be Holly.

Some retired welder had put together three big folding chair carts, steel monstrosities capable of storing more than a hundred aluminum chairs and set it on wheels so the whole works could be rolled in and out of a storage closet. Holly had it out, and all by herself she was setting up chairs.

"Funeral tonight?" I said, after coming up behind her in silence.

"Hey," she said, calculating, "you and I can get the tables. They're downstairs."

"Aren't you doing the kids' work?" I asked.

"They do better when somebody shows them the way," she said, and she put her head down and steamed away toward the stairs, me following, sheep-like. She opened the door to the storage room, where long Formica tables, heavy as lead, stood up against the south wall. "They're hard on the fingers," she said, looking down at her nails. "You man enough?"

"I'm a preacher," I told her.

"That's my concern," she said.

We did it all by ourselves, but I had my own agenda. "Sit down for a minute," I said, pointing at one of the chairs in the youth room. "Before I have a heart attack, I got a bone to pick."

She looked back at me, stopped, but never sat down.

"Here's what I'm proposing," I told her, rubbing the stiffness out of my hands. "I'm thinking

I can get you and Ben, and maybe somebody like Russ Ruiter, from the bank, into my study down here and hammer this whole bank mess out once and for all, so that there doesn't have to be any lawsuits here, no brother against sister or whatever—nobody hung out to dry."

She bristled, her eyes sharpening to a point at mine.

I kept on going. "If needs be," I said, "just the three of us. You got your rights and everything, and I'm not trying to tell you it's all your fault—but what I'm suggesting is we try to solve our own problems down here." I pointed down at the floor we were standing on.

"This isn't a court," she said.

"I know it's not a court. That's the point—to avoid it."

"Why?" she said.

"Courts get ugly," I said. "And they cost money—even if you win."

"I'm not scared," she said.

"I'm not saying you are," I told her. "I'm suggesting there may be a better way here, a less public—"

"I'm not shy either," she said. "I haven't done a thing wrong but put my mother in the Home. If you think I'm worried about what people think—"

"I'm not."

"Then I've got nothing to fear. It's the American way, isn't it?" she said, "—law and justice and all of that."

"What's the point?" I said.

"The point is nobody ought to get thrown off their property just because the bank wants to make a parking lot. That's the point, padre," she said. "Let me get the bank in court—I'll win that one," she said. She stood away from the chair. "Shoot," she said, "what jury's going to find for the bank when they're taking on this fifty-year-old woman and her elderly mother." She pointed her thumb toward her chest. "The bank doesn't have a prayer."

"I'm trying to be a peacemaker," I said.

"There's a time for peace," she told me, "and a time for war." Then she walked right out of the room.

Right about then, kids started coming in the front door, half of them plugged into Walkmans and carrying portable ovens, dishes and jugs, bags full of groceries and pecks of potatoes. I watched her as she began to storm through the instructions, bark out signals and commands, Patton of the fellowship hall—freezer paper over the tables, sauces mixed and readied to heat, potatoes peeled, serving lines straightened and streamlined.

"What exactly are you after?" I said to her twenty minutes later, when she stopped to take a breath. "You want to move back into that house?"

"What do you mean?" she said.

"You're not after more money?" I said.

She grabbed my arm. "I don't give two hoots for the money," she said. "And I don't care what people think—the point is, they're not getting my house." And then a swear word, the only one I ever heard her use, kids all around her, enough volume to be heard and then some. "I don't care. I can win this one," she said.

"That's it?—winning?" I asked her.

"This time, yes," she said.

Squeals and laughter pulled her away toward the kitchen, where a squadron of fifteen-year-old kids peeled potatoes, their sleeves rolled, over the open sinks.

I went to the Home to visit Holly's mother but found a Do Not Disturb sign hung from her door. When I asked a nurse about it, she said to maybe first call the desk before I came again. "Dora doesn't much care for visitors," she told me.

The idea of people in my own church heading into a lawsuit bothered me, and I must admit some sympathy for Holly, the bank—an institution Christ would likely have vilified, exerting so much pressure that Holly Eidemiller was provoked into public profanity. I couldn't see her mother that day, but while I was at the home I spotted Jenny Mulder, who's been there for years and

remains in better shape mentally than most of the others. For years already she's been in a wheel chair, but she'd hardly call herself confined.

"So what's new at the Pioneer home?" I asked her. She was sitting in the sun room on the east end with a circle of women who didn't seem tuned in to the program on the television in front of them. A wide piece of pressed wood was laid over the handles of her wheelchair, a game of solitaire spread out in front. "I hear Dora Wester's not very social?" I said. "I came to see her especially."

"The woman's got reasons," she said. She brought a couple little numbers up to the row of aces on top. "You can't know any more about what goes on inside somebody like that than you can know what's in these cards." She pointed, then cracked the edges of the deck on the table-top. "I don't think she ever got over her little boy."

I had no idea what she was talking about.

"It would have been awful enough to lose a boy in the way he went to glory, but to have that death come so quick after her husband's—nobody should have to go through that, too. And then the boy was such a public death."

All I'd known about Holly Eidemiller was her energy and, recently, her anger.

Jenny put the cards down, set her elbows on the lap board, positioned her hands as if she were to pray. "When it happens in front of a crowd of kids, nobody forgets. People die here all the time, but usually there's only a nurse around." She shook her head. "But when kids see one of their own get killed the way her boy did—it's in there forever." She brought an old hand up to her temple, as if it could reposition a thought.

"What happened?" I said. "I'm sorry—"

"Train. Flyer—one of them that don't stop when it comes charging through town. Gone now. Passenger trains." She scratched her chin with the top of the deck. "For years after, I never heard the 9:15 without thinking about the tracks being clear. It come right through the town fifty mile-an-hour maybe."

"A train wreck?" I said.

"Didn't wreck the train one bit. Engineer stopped because he saw it happen, saw the boy right in front of his nose and hit the brakes—you ever heard flyers come to a stop? That was before we had local ambulance here, but anybody anywhere near town knew it had to be something bad, such a screech that thing put up."

"Dora Wester had a boy who got hit by a train?—Holly's brother?"

"—And she lost her husband not more than four-five years before. Heart attack. Wasn't even fifty. A welder downtown at Les Maarten's. Fell over at work. Today they'd find a reason and somebody would sue, but back then they said his heart just stopped working. I think we're better off not knowing sometimes."

"Her husband?"

"—Jake."

"And then her son?"

"—Killed in town on the night the kids were making homecoming floats. For the parade—homecoming parade. For the football game the next night. It was Thursday, the day before homecoming for everybody except little Herbie Wester, who had his homecoming the night before, you might say." She pointed her eyes morally. "My word, I'm talking like an old woman, ain't it so?—getting all mixed up and you not knowing a thing. But it's hard to imagine anybody wouldn't know."

"He got hit by a train?" I asked.

"That ain't the worst of it." She looked around as if someone might be listening. "It was a game they were playing. My Kenny told me later, my son. Boys played 'chicken' is what they called it—who can cross the tracks last, who dares."

She let that sit for a minute, stared me down.

"It wasn't an accident?"

"You don't call that an accident? He's a boy, Reverend," she said to me. "He's just a boy. I call

that an accident."

"One of them jumps and then another? You mean, it was Russian roulette or something?"

"Russian what?"

"I mean, almost like suicide."

"Call it an accident. If you don't, it hurts way too much, even now, even after all these years."

"And his mother?—she didn't take it well—his mother?"

"Would you?"

"I didn't mean it that way," he told her.

"She wasn't a strong woman to start with."

"How old was Holly?" he said.

"Girl."

"Younger?"

"Younger but stronger. Always was." The old woman shook her head. "You know how hard that woman can work? You ever seen her work?"

"Sure," I said.

"That woman can work like a man."

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There was a time in my life when I considered a future in the ministry to be something almost idyllic. I pictured myself working through the New Testament all week long with maybe a half-dozen top-notch commentaries and some state-of-the-art concordance on a CD-ROM. I never worried about how a preacher in a town as small as Barneveld might spend his week, because if I loved anything at all it was mixing it up with God's word. What I never thought I'd be is a detective, but sometimes that's the work I do.

Armed with what Jenny had told me, I nudged the Herbie Wester story into conversation whenever I could in the next week or two, trying to throw some light on a death that was almost forty years behind all of us, except the Westers. And everybody knew something, even those who weren't alive in 1957.

Alvinah Westerbeke, 73, remembers the entire freshman class walking in a single line from the old high school to the church, two blocks away, in almost perfect silence. She'd watched them from the jewelry shop, and she remembers how odd it was to see all those high school kids walking so peacefully you'd have thought they were dazed—because they were, she says.

Bert Nonhof was only ten years old, too young to have been anywhere near Maarten's Shop that night. He claims Herbie Wester's death made such an impression on him that even today he can see it happen, just like he was there. He still sees it.

Clarence Walraven, 52, remembers being one of the kids making a float that night. He remembers how the teachers who were supervising knew right away something horrible had happened when the train screamed. By the time he got there somebody had covered the body with a blanket. It was dark—you couldn't see much. The next day he says you felt this urge to go to see the exact spot, and yet at the same time, nobody dared. "In my mind, there's still blood on the stones right there along the track," he says.

Beth Koppers, our organist, was just a child. She remembers telling her own parents how upset she was when the homecoming parade was called off, and she says she'll never forget the sermon she got, right then and there.

Freya Logterman says her mother spent hours over at the Wester home for weeks after the accident. "Of course, I lost a sister about ten years earlier," she told me. Then she corrected herself. "I should say, 'my mother lost a daughter.' I was so young I didn't really understand." They lived just across the street.

Fern Klein, 48, says for years as a child she wondered whether or not Herbie Wester went to hell for playing such a horrible game. She says she remembers lying in bed and imagining that boy in robes of fire.

Jeremy Brill says every Homecoming he still thinks of it, even though he wasn't even born at the time of Herbie's death.

Avery Lasserdahl says he moved to Barneveld two years after it happened. He was in high school, and he remembers the kid's picture in a hallway display—thin and bookish—and he remembers thinking how strange it was that Holly could come from that house, because she was, "well," he said, "she was Holly—even back then."

Mike Blekkink, 50, was in Holly's class. He remembers Holly being named Homecoming Queen when she was a senior, partly because nobody had forgotten what happened, and partly because Holly was, well, Holly. "It felt so good, you know, when she got Queen," he says.

Ann Moray, 52, says she remembers being almost obsessed about how the boys who were with him that night would feel. "It takes more than one kid to play 'chicken,'" she said. She remembers sitting beside one of them at the funeral, seeing how broken up he was—"even more than the rest of us," she said.

"Who?" I said. "Can you tell me?"

"Oh, I don't remember all of them anymore, but the one that sticks out in my mind is Russ Ruiter."

Russ Ruiter, the Vice President of the Barneveld State Bank.

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So I found out what I could about Russ Ruiter, the bank's Vice President, and what I discovered was that he's a man with a past that most members of Barneveld Calvary wouldn't be proud of. But then, neither is Russ.

He is a VP for the simple reason that he married—his second marriage—the owner's daughter, a woman who had also previously loved and lost. They found each other in a fashion that led both of them to believe they were foreordained to a mutual future, no matter how different they were or are, Russ being six years Natalie's senior, his roots, like hers, in Barneveld, but in a whole different social class. The two of them never met in town. After moving to Chicago and suffering through a pair of bad marriages, they nursed their individual pain in the place that eventually drew them together, the church, specifically a church they both picked because it had links denominationally to Barneveld Calvary.

At one time, Russ drank almost viciously; I knew that before. I've talked to the man, and I respect him for what he's put behind him. It was his own asinine behavior—his adjective, by the way—that led to his first wife's picking up their children and leaving him for an unmarried lawyer she'd met in the laundry room of the apartments. By his own account, he stayed in a stupor for almost a year, even though he held onto a job as an ad exec at a third-rate radio station, where he says most of the personnel were quite frequently as drunk as he was. He was grand salesman and made out famously in an industry where a fast mouth was a ticket to success and most of the contacts were made over booze. That's what he says.

He met Natalie in a class of losers, he says, a whole Sunday School of them, in fact, a Bible study for singles at that Chicago church, a place he went when he realized he could fall no farther without flirting with hell itself. He claims he didn't recognize her, because he'd left Barneveld by the time Natalie had come through high school. But she knew him, because among his other talents was a natural athleticism that made him good at just about every sport he tried, including arrogance.

It wasn't long, he says, before they found themselves, each other, and something of the values they'd both abandoned, and together came back to Barneveld. Natalie's father didn't kill any calf or throw a great party, but once he saw his new son-in-law showing some entrepreneurial spirit, he found a way to get him into the bank, where Russ has been ever since.

Russ is slick, even today, almost too slick. When you see him, when you talk to him, you get the sense that he's seen more of real life than most people in Barneveld ever do, and in Barneveld, that characteristic alone can be scary to some people at church. Nonetheless, Natalie's father likes Russ's charisma.

Russ Ruiter is a man so slim, so proportioned, that the suspenders over his crisp, white shirt make him look like something off a magazine ad, and in Barneveld that's unusual for a fifty-year-old man. His secretary opened his door when I visited him, introduced me, and then deftly straightened out the papers on his desk before leaving.

"She's working on my image," Russ said, pointing at her. "That's all they teach kids nowadays—image." He played with her, didn't flirt, just played lovingly. "Gretchen has a degree in business management," he told me—for her benefit, "but she's still the one making coffee."

The young woman was wearing a suit and slacks color-coordinated with the women out front.

"I told her to marry somebody with bucks like I did," he said, "but that's already been decided. This is Gretchen Hamlin—married to Willie, you know, of Paul." He pointed at the two of us, and Gretchen nodded politely. "It's a crime, isn't it?—all that money for a degree, and she ends up working for a guy who flunked out of community college?"

She snapped her head up. "I keep telling him that someday I'm going to take that chair myself."

"If I die of a stroke or something, Reverend, check the coffee," Russ said, pointing to the steam rising from his cup.

Then she was gone.

I rushed through some formalities, but Russ is the kind of man who really doesn't require softening.

"I talked to Holly Eidemiller about the bank and herself getting together sometime in my office and trying to talk this thing through—about the house—"

"Geez, do it," he said.

"I tried," I told him.

"No go?"

"Wouldn't budge. Not in the least."

"That determined, eh?"

"Wouldn't hear of it."

He shook his head. "If that house were a mansion, it'd be one thing—but it isn't," he said, almost painfully, pointing over his shoulder.

"It's a good offer?"

"Reverend, this banking business is something I'm still a little uncomfortable with." He leaned back and put his hands up behind him. "Remember, this is a guy who spent more time than I want to remember living on beer and pretzels—and I bought those on credit. Gretchen's in here straightening out papers that got numbers on 'em I don't have enough education to read. But I got a heart, all right? I wouldn't sell her short—never." He riffled through some papers.

Maybe it's his past, but there's something about him that's much less uptight than a lot of people in my congregation. "Listen," I said, "this is maybe a long shot, but I been hearing this old story lately about Holly's brother—"

"About Herbie." He dropped his hands down to the arms of his chair as if the question itself had let out some steam. "Shoot, Matilda," he said, shaking his head, "right from the start I didn't want to do this—I really didn't. Every day of my life I come to work at a building right next door to that haunted house, but I never wanted to buy it—because of all that." He looked down at the palms of his hands. "You know that stuff about life-lines in your hands," he said, "about how long they are or something?" He looked up at me, pointing at his hand. "I got something on here that some witch would note right away," he said. "Herbie Wester's here," he said, "and there ain't a thing I can do about it."

"The kid got killed playing chicken—" I simply started the story and waited for Russ to pick it up.

For just a moment, I think he looked up at me as the outsider I always was in Barneveld. But it didn't stop him. "I like to think there's nobody around who remembers who it was exactly that was with him that night—that's what I like to think," he said. He picked up a pen between his fingers and dropped it like a drum stick on the desk pad. "Maybe it was my fault." He looked down, poked at his glasses with the back of his hand. "Shoot, Reverend, I was full grown at the end of sixth grade." He pointed to himself. "Maybe I did it, I don't know."

"Nobody blames you," I told him.

"Who you been talking to?" Ruiter asked.

I shook my head. "They ought to have a book of things you have to know before you come into a town like this one—local history. I didn't know a thing, but nobody I talked to blames you."

He didn't look relieved. "It's probably just me."

"What do you know that everybody else doesn't?" I said.

"I was there, for starters," he said, nodding hard. "I can't say I saw it happen, but I was there. Nobody else.

"What do you mean?"

Ruiter pulled himself closer up to the desk. "Nobody else that was there lives here anymore, and maybe that's why."

"Because of the accident?"

"I don't know," he said. "But we used to do it all the time, and it sounds so much worse than what it was—"

"This Chicken game?"

"It sounds awful. Shoot, my daughter came home from school a few months ago with the story, told us all about Herbie Wester, picked it up in a health class, drivers ed maybe—and it was a big deal because whoever told her said it happened right here at a certain place along the tracks in this very town. I mean it happened right here. 'What an awful story,' Angie says, and Nat is sitting on the couch reading the paper and she doesn't even look up because she doesn't know—she was that much younger than I was."

Still holding the pencil, he leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. "And already I got this whole thing with Holly going on because the Board of Directors thinks we got to have that lot for parking, and the house isn't really worth that much anyway and I keep telling them they got to pay more, and they keep saying that fifteen years ago or whatever, Holly sold this whole chunk we're standing on right now, and they can't begin to understand why on earth she'd balk, especially at the sweet offer we're making. And all the time, the only way I can figure out all of Holly's fireworks is that it's Herbie behind this, his ghost, Reverend. She's blaming me for it, and maybe she's got a right to."

Guilt was thick as fog in that office, but I still didn't see the whole story—a kid on the tracks, a train, a game of 'chicken.' "She does have a right?" I said.

"It was my idea to grab a smoke away from all the teachers—big deal, you know? You're hanging around the floats making fun of the good-looking girls and what not, and then you just got to be a man, you know—got to show something. So I said to some guys to go out along the tracks and light up. I think I did—I don't know. I can't remember exactly what happened that night, other than that I was there when he went down. I never heard a thing, but I remember looking back and seeing him fall away from the wheels, dead. I remember that." He threw the pencil on the desk, put his elbows down, and ran his fingers through his eyes.

"It's a personal thing with Holly?" I said.

"I don't know how else to figure."

"That's the whole thing?"

"What do you mean?" he said.

"I mean, what happened that night."

"That's forty years ago," he said. He rubbed his temples, ran his hands around the back of his head, and leaned back in the chair. "What I see is little more than a movie shot, I think—something my mind creates. You tell me—" he pointed to his head, "what happens to a memory soaked in blood? How do you get it clean?" He shrugged his shoulders.

"Who else knows?" I said.

"Me—and her, I guess. And now you."

The look on his face was a kind of grief, I think.

"I never even told Nat what really happened. I mean, what for? I was a kid," he said, purely defensive. He looked down at the pictures of his kids beneath the glass on his desk. "She never brought it up—Holly didn't. We asked her to come in—Andy asked her to come in because I told him, 'I don't want be any part of this, really'—"

"Even then?"

"It was already in my mind—that she was blaming me." He shook his head. "But the whole hardball stuff?—getting the town council to play the game with us and everything?—I don't like it." He pulled his foot up to the desk top and plunked it down. "I don't like any of it."

I needed to understand more. "What was he like—Herbie?" I said.

Russ looked around. "Truth?"

"Truth."

"Wimpy—why do you think we called him 'Herbie'?"

"So it's all of you in a bunch," I said, trying to put it together, "and the train is coming and this big clump of kids—"

And then Russ took over. "And I jumped, and I laughed—I don't even remember if I was scared. Probably not. I was laughing though, and then I looked and he was in the wheels—just for a minute he was in the wheel, flopping. And then he was dead."

He pushed his chair back from the desk and stood, hooked his fingers into his belt and tugged his pants up just a bit. "How can I explain it?—he lost the game." He turned away toward the window facing Main. "I know it's wrong—it's an awful game. I understand that."

"Often?" I said. "You played this kind of game often?"

"With cars too. Everybody knew it. Guys did it with cars—"

"Come on—"

"I'm not kidding. It happened. And we did it too, just like we did that night, except nobody ever, ever got hurt. Only that time." He shook his head. A car came up through the drive-thru, and Ruiter came back to his chair.

"You really need that property?" I said.

Ruiter laughed. "When I married Nat, I really landed with my butt in the butter. And what I learned is that you don't sit on money. It's got to get used."

Something had to be done. "You think I ought to try to get the two of you together?" I said. "Maybe just the three of us. What we need is some peace—I mean, for both of you."

"Wouldn't have been for a parking lot, I'd have been okay," he said. "The same is probably true of her."

"How can you say that?" I said.

He smiled, knowingly. "Don't you have something back there, Reverend?" he said. "Isn't there something you carry around with you—"

"I don't understand—"

"There's things you carry until you've had them so long you don't know what it might be like without them," he said, "and they start to carry you eventually." He broke into a laugh. "You don't have to think about them to know they're there."

"What about forgiveness?"

"Really," he said. "How's that woman ever, ever going to forgive me for killing her brother? We're talking about a real flesh-and-blood human being with forty years of blame in her soul. You and me and Holly get together, you think you can straighten that out?"

"God can," I told him.

"It's not God's house we're toying with here, it's Holly's—and you've heard her."

"You're not angry with her?" I said.

"What Holly did that night and for the rest of her life is heroic. I'm serious."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Her ma never got over Herbie's death," he said. "There's a fancy name for it—maybe Gretchen knows it." He pointed at the preacher. "You ought to with all your education. My mother used to call it just 'housebound.' Mrs. Wester never got out. She wouldn't. But nobody blamed her—even before her old man died—"

"That was just a few years before—"

"Not long. I remember that one because I was happy to see the guy go. He whipped me once. We lived in town then, and I must have got sick of Herbie—I don't remember—teased him, maybe

beat him up a little. But what I remember is the way his old man followed me and slapped me up good—oh, I don't mean he hurt me, really. I remember thinking Herbie was going to get it worse from me next time for signing his old man up to fight his battles."

"Was she there? The time their dad whipped you?—was Holly there?"

"I didn't see her." He shook his head. "All I remember is that I was scared my old man would see him beating on me. My old man was no saint, Reverend, and I thought he'd take George Wester apart right there in the shadow of the steeple of the old downtown church. That's what scared me."

"Your father?" I said.

"That my old man's gone, Reverend," Russ said, "makes your job a lot easier—let me tell you that. Maybe I got too much of him in me."

"What happened that night?"

"He didn't make it."

"That's the whole story?"

"He was trying to be something he couldn't be, something I pushed him to be, I suppose. But when he made that last jump, he couldn't pull it off." He kept shaking his head. "I think of it often as my fault—I really do. I teased him mercilessly."

"Maybe you ought to tell her," I said.

"What good would it do?" he asked.

"Truth," I said.

"I don't know that she's interested in that," he said. "And if I was Holly, after all this time, I don't know myself that I'd believe me—or want to. By this time, maybe there's no difference."

But I walked out of the bank still carrying a fervent sense that if ever God's forgiveness was worth everything I'd considered it to be, it was capable of bringing healing to something as old and as final as the death of Herbie Wester. I wonder now if maybe I wasn't testing the Lord and his promises, insisting that everything I believed would be proven true by some cessation of Holly's bitter anger.

I found her where I thought I would, working at Marv's Lunch, one of the few businesses left on Barneveld's Main Street, a place she waitresses not because she needs the money but because she gets to see a lot of people. I'd been warned twice about pursuing the matter—first, by an experienced preacher who told me digging up old secrets was like trying to root out milkweed, since the lateral roots of old transgressions just about make the weed impossible to kill. And now Ruiter himself said he thought clearing anything up absolutely impossible. But I've always been impressed by the character of a holy fool, someone who keeps on going in the name of Christ, even though the walls are too high or burdens too heavy.

When Holly brought me some water, she winked. An older woman I didn't know was waiting to pay for her food with a checkbook she had withdrawn slowly from her purse. She opened it, then turned it around and laid it on the counter top so Holly could fill in the amount. Then, she tucked the checkbook back in her purse, her cane, not a white one, poking out in front of her as she braced for the steps at the front door.

"Poor woman thinks she can still see," Holly said when she came back to me. "What is it with people makes them deny what they're losing? Most of the old geezers who come in here can't hear anything beneath a shout, but none of them wear hearing aids. What a world," she said. "So you can't do without coffee this morning, Pastor?" She swung the pot at me and right-sided the heavy green cup in front of me. "So what brings you out?" she asked.

"It's Herbie, isn't it?" I said. Why wait?

She put the coffee back down. "You want something with that?" she said.

"Roll—cinnamon roll," I said.

She lifted the glass panel from the pastry shelves, grabbed a paper plate from beneath the counter, then picked up a roll with a long aluminum pinchers.

"I think I understand," I said.

She poured what was left in the nearly emptied pot into the sink, rinsed it out quickly, and

placed it beneath the coffee maker before pouring in another pot full of hot water. The place was empty really. It was almost 11, and three older women were sitting across the room in a booth.

"I just came from Russ Ruiter," I said.

Her face was so full of hate when she turned that I wondered if confrontation had been the right maneuver. "Like nobody else maybe," I said, "you know how rotten tough it is to forgive."

For a moment she stared, judging whether or not she could trust me. "Nobody knows but the two of us," she told me.

"You and me?" he said.

"Me and him," she said.

"Three of us—and more," I told her.

"Thirty-nine years, and every day I got to live with a lie." She turned away and crossed her arms over her chest, then started talking in a snippy voice. "Don't play chicken. Just look at what happened to that kid who died up there by the welding shop. You guys know the story? It happened right here in Barneveld, right in the middle of town." She shook her head angrily. "Every year somebody tells kids about the brainless boy who got run over by the train on a dare." She looked right at me, "Every year my brother is a moral lesson—a bloody moral lesson. Even my kids came home with it. Don't be stupid like Herbie—when the fact is, he was murdered."

"Murdered?" I said.

"You heard me."

I knew I couldn't push her—not Holly, and not this, as old as the evil was inside her. Murder, I thought. Murder.

"What did you tell them—your kids?" I said.

"I lied," she said, her brown eyes tightening into something wholly colorless. "I told them their uncle was a good kid who one night got himself in a bad place, and they shouldn't think of him as some smart punk brainless hood, because he wasn't. He wasn't that at all," she said. "He got himself in with a bad bunch." She kept the towel in her hand as she brought her fists down quietly on the countertop. "And they said, 'Who?'—everyone of my kids said who is this bad bunch?"

"What'd you say?"

She raised her chin. "I told them they were all gone—all of the guys he was with—that's what I said, and for a long time it was true."

"Then it wasn't a lie?" I said.

"As good as," she said. "Half-truth. What I never told them was that Russ Ruiter pushed my brother with his own bloody hands." Years of anger tightened her resolve. "That's what I never said. I could have poisoned his name, but I didn't." She leaned over and came in close. "Just him and me know—that's it."

"Russ pushed him?" I said.

"Shoved him because he hated him. I know he hated him. Shoved him. Killed him. Threw him down in the path of that train. That's what I know—"

"How?"

"I don't have to say," she said, pulling herself back up to her feet. "But I know what happened and so does he."

She grabbed the full pot off the urn and headed across the diner to the ladies, where she suddenly became Holly Eidemiller, refilling cups off coffee and flowing with the banter that earns practiced waitresses good money in cafes other than Marv's Lunch. "How's the coffee anyway?" she asked them. "Town water's so off-color lately you'd think it came out of somebody's fish tank."

The ladies said the coffee was fine, how when it was coffee you couldn't tell how yellow the water was anyway, and then they all laughed. "Besides," one of them said, "it's always better when somebody else makes it."

"And cleans up after you," Holly said, swinging the rag.

That's how she'd done it for all those years—carried the story in some iron part of her heart, smiled through life itself and covered the hurt, unmasking it occasionally, but only when she was all alone. That's how she'd nursed her sense of the truth for all those years. It had become as much

a part of her as her short-cropped hair. Maybe what she'd carried actually produced her abundant energy, the intensity of that secret so explosive it had created its own kind of life.

She came back around the counter and stopped in front of me, back in a character as full of hate as anything I'd ever seen on stage, eyes fierce, full of heat and anger. She pointed at my cinnamon roll with those steel tongs. "You want me just to put that thing back?—You haven't touched it."

When I nodded, she put down the pot, grabbed the cinnamon roll with the tongs, shoved it back to the place where it had been before, then smiled. "You tell me this, Pastor. How can a man who's sitting where he is even smile today?" she said. "How can he live with himself? He may think he's home free, but as long as I live, I'll always know the truth. He pushed my little brother."

She stared at me with such ferocity that I knew the only force that could possibly alter her sense of what had happened was something divine, capable of turning her inside out. For forty years she'd told herself that her brother's death was murder and absolved him, and herself, of the misery. It seemed to me then that it wasn't the truth that had set her free at all, it was her version of a story that a whole town couldn't forget. And I began to think that some things, like my friend had said, were better left unexamined. What had happened in Barneveld one homecoming week was buried so deeply that maybe the best one could do is keep down the growth of hate by mowing it down, time after time after time.

Fern Klein saw me walk out of Marv's Lunch just a few minutes later, and then called the church to ask whether I was okay, because my face, she said, was long as a hard afternoon.

My only thought was to go back to Russ, not because I was sure that I could do something about all of this, but because I assumed he ought to know that at least we were right about something—at the bottom of all her anger lay the death of her brother.

The Holy Fool in me died at that moment, got pinned by the stronger self, the voice of reason. I got to thinking there was nothing I could do.

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Across the street from the bank stood a home that was quite likely built just following the Second World War. The lot was not large, but it was wooded and beautifully groomed. That house was rectangular, with two wide, lattice-work bay windows across the front, giving the place a slightly pretentious, New England-ish look in a prairie town like Barneveld. A few might have called it showy, a house that looked smart, as people used to say. Three identically-sized dormers protruded from its steep roof, and on the far end, the east end, a sandstone fireplace chimney spread across what seemed half of the wall.

Most everyone in town was shocked one morning, maybe three weeks later, when a van pulled up in front of that house and a crew of three started to work. In little more than a day they moved out most of furnishings and the widow who'd lived there; and then another crew, maybe five guys, rolled up in a flatbed truck. It took them a couple long working days to manage it, but soon enough they had that home cut—literally cut—from its own foundations and jacked up a foot or two to get huge studs beneath the frame, then hoisted on the flatbed, and lugged to a new foundation on a vacant lot on the east edge of town.

The house belonged to Natalie Hermanson Ruiter's grandmother. Some of the older people in town still call the place "the banker's house" because Natalie's grandfather, like her father and now her husband, was a Barneveld banker, at that time the Barneveld banker. But that house was hoisted up and hauled away by a crew of house-movers from a town just over the South Dakota border. Then a few of the trees were shaved from the lot, the whole place excavated, and concrete laid down tastefully between what trees remained.

I have no idea what Russ Ruiter might have said to convince the Board of Directors to drop the suit for the Wester home place, but the old radio salesman must have created a convincing case because in the end the bank's new parking lot ended up across the street instead of on the adjacent lot. No one would have guessed such a thing would happen, and when you compare those two houses—and the two lots—what the Board of Directors ended up doing about whatever parking problem they thought they had, seemed not only unexpected but plain stupid.

In fact, today some still can't understand how a person as wonderful as Holly Wester Eidemiller could be so stubborn about a house that had nothing going for it other than the memories of a childhood that quite likely held very great pain.

Two years passed—not even two really, but two homecomings at least, neither of which passed without reminding me of the horrible death of Herbie Wester.

This afternoon I sat at the bedside of a woman whose children are bitter because they may very well lose a mother who'd seemed the very picture of health. Alvinah Westerbeke was injured critically in an accident, and the doctors don't hold much hope for her life. She'd parked her car in that new parking lot across the street from the bank, looked both ways before crossing, then started out slowly, carefully, as she always does.

Meanwhile, some kid angled out into the left lane on Main Street to avoid someone parallel parking in front of the bank. For some reason nobody knows, this kid suddenly decided to chase down Linden, taking a sharp right from what was almost the left lane on Main. He never laid eyes on Mrs. Westerbeke, not until he heard a sound he'll never forget and saw the old woman roll up and over his hood before falling to the side of the car.

Mrs. Westerbeke is in very bad shape, and the kid's a broken mess. He's now begun a life that will be haunted, like Holly Wester and Russ Ruiter. Mrs. Westerbeke will likely die in the next couple of days; when she does, the boy's guilt will only grow.

Her daughter spoke to me about her mother's condition outside her room after I visited, and then she said this: "I'm ready to sue. I really am. Everybody knows putting that parking lot across the street was dangerous. Everybody knows that. It was just a matter of time before somebody like Mother got hit. People have talked about it for a long time. Everybody knows it. I can't understand why they didn't just buy the Wester place. No one can. It's so dangerous."

Who gets the blame here? Holly Eidemiller, the saint, for investing in a version of the story many Barneveld people believe she created in order to cover her horrendous grief? Or Russ Ruiter, the prodigal son, who offered mercy to atone for his sin the night of Herbie's death—whatever that sin was? Or should it be me, the preacher, who threw in the towel on his own ideals and told himself that this time the truth of something buried beneath forty years of pain was simply not worth pursuing.

Who gets sued here? Who is the guilty?

We all stand in need of grace.